

STRESS

Stress is an unavoidable and necessary part of life. It helps the mind and body deal with life's challenges, such as an algebra test, a job interview, or another driver pulling out in front of us. It accelerates the heart rate, rushes adrenalin to the muscles, and makes people mentally alert.

But too much stress is harmful. If it doesn't disappear after the challenge is met, or if challenges occur too often, then it can affect both mental and physical health.

Dealing with and reducing stress can improve both physical and mental health.

Causes

Stress is the body's and mind's way of meeting a challenge, such as the following:

- Change in life, on the job, or in daily routines
- Money problems
- Illness or injury
- Family changes
- Retirement

Any one of the above may be minor, but many minor challenges can add up to a very stressful situation.

Anxiety

Stress leads to a build-up of tension that, if not relieved, can cause anxiety - a fear of what might happen even when no threat exists. Some signs of anxiety are nervousness, dizziness, trembling, a pounding heart, inability to relax, breathing difficulties, and abnormal eating habits.

A little anxiety is necessary to stay alert, but prolonged anxiety can lead to serious health problems such as ulcers and high blood pressure and can impair the ability to enjoy life.

Depression

The disappointments or frustrations that cause stress also can lead to depression, a serious mental illness characterized by fatigue, insomnia, boredom, restlessness, lack of interest in life, and withdrawal. Left

untreated, depression can lead to feelings of unworthiness, isolation, and even suicide.

Reducing stress

Because some stress in life is unavoidable, avoiding stress when possible is a good mental-health practice. Below are some tips.

- Talk things over with a friend or someone who is involved in the problem.
- Exercise regularly.
- Plan work to make the best use of time.
- Take a break.
- Learn to relax.
- Be realistic.
- Avoid stressful situations.
- Work to change stressful conditions.

Some don'ts

There are ways to relieve stress that are actually more harmful in the long run.

- Don't turn to drugs or alcohol.
- Don't smoke.
- Don't drink beverages that contain caffeine.
- Don't ignore the warning signs: nervousness, irritability, panic, mysterious aches and pains, headaches, insomnia, dizziness, pounding heart, or abnormal eating habits.

Getting help

In a situation where stress is getting out of hand, don't hesitate to ask for help. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of intelligence. Many employers offer employee assistance programs, and schools have counselors who can help. Or, consult a physician or community mental health center. Mental health professionals can help in looking at life, finding the sources of stress, and suggesting ways to deal with it.

People under stress can also help one another by being good listeners, offering constructive advice or assistance, and suggesting professional help and just being supportive of those who choose to seek such help.

What else to do?

People with a mental illness often face a stigma attached to these illnesses by society. This stigma causes discrimination against people with a mental illness in employment, housing, health care, and the ability to buy health insurance. By learning more about mental illness and the effectiveness of treatment, this discrimination can end, removing the stigma that acts as a barrier to successful treatment.